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ABSTRACT

The American dream is a dream filled with inexhaustible resources, boundless opportunities, and untold wealth. Fueled by the "psychology of affluence"--a social attitude that encourages us to want and expect more of everything--the dream equates quality of life with material wealth and assumes that our fulfillment in life is independent of the condition of others. Consumption becomes an end in itself, a ludicrous notion when that which is consumed is finite and irreplaceable. An alternative to this childish dream is the philosophy of voluntary simplicity, which promotes a lifestyle compatible with the collective needs of the larger community and consciously refutes the belief in materialism as the way to human fulfillment. The truly important ingredients in human fulfillment are mental, not material, and include infinite resources--knowledge and meaningful associations with others. Organized camping can foster the idea of simple living and promote emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth and development as the highest forms of human fulfillment. Camp policies and administrative actions should emphasize the ideals of simple living; several possibilities are: (1) a waste management program that uses recycling; (2) energy conservation practices; (3) simple, healthy foods that are not overpackaged; (4) intimate contact with the natural environment; (5) minimum impact or "no trace" camping practices in natural areas; (6) character development through reflection; and (7) community cohesion among diverse fellow campers. The document contains 11 references. (SV)

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PROMOTING SIMPLE LIVING IN A MATERIALISTIC SOCIETY

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PROMOTING SIMPLE LIVING
IN A MATERIALISTIC SOCIETY

Introduction

In California, a popular bumper sticker reads, "He who dies with the most toys, wins." What makes the bumper sticker biting is the fact that so many Californians do indeed conduct themselves as though the quality of their lives could be measured by the number of things accumulated during the course of a lifetime. It is the land of recreational vehicles, big screen TVs, and larger and larger homes.

It would be easy to dismiss California as an oddity were it not for the fact that the rest of the United States tries so hard to emulate it, and the fact that the rest of the world tries so hard to emulate the United States. More often than not, the California dream is the American dream is the Third World dream. It is a dream filled with inexhaustible resources, boundless opportunities, and untold wealth. To those aroused by it, the dream's message rings loud and clear. If you are willing to work hard enough, nothing need go unpossessed.

In this article we question the wisdom of this traditional version of the American dream. We then replace it with what we deem to be a more attractive and attainable alternative. Finally, we focus on the possible contributions of organized camping in making this more sustainable and, we trust, more satisfying dream come true.

The Fading Dream

There are at least two things fundamentally wrong with the American dream as it is presently conceived. The first problem

rests in the equation of the good life with material wealth. It is increasingly clear that as more and more people buy into the American dream, proportionately fewer and fewer materials are available to make the dream come true. We live, after all, in a world of limits, a world increasingly taxed by the demands we place on it. To cultivate the expectation that more and more people can achieve fulfillment in life through the accumulation of increasingly scarce goods, no matter how hard they work, is globally counterproductive. It results, as many of us well know, in growing frustration as we fall farther and farther behind in our race to get more. The American dream, then, is at best a fading dream, a wisp of its former self. But there is more to the problem than that.

The underlying assumption that we can be fulfilled in life independent of the condition of those around us is also suspect. This "me first" philosophy, as Daniel Yankelovich (1981) calls it, does not recognize that there is more to the human condition than the singular self. We are also members of a larger community of life. We are both whole and part. Consequently, to the extent that our actions are governed by a concern only for the individualistic part of our selves, we are not pursuing human fulfillment. We are pursuing self-aggrandizement. To prosper materially while others go without is a hollow form of fulfillment indeed.

However sweet, the traditional American dream thus needs reweaving. Our challenge is to reconstitute it in a way that is both attractive and attainable to all people. This requires rejecting economic affluence as a prerequisite for self-fulfillment as well as recognizing that individual fulfillment is inextricably intertwined with the fulfillment of others.

The Ends/Means Confusion

As a first step in this process, it is necessary to untangle the ends/means snarl that has confused so many of us into believing that the path to human fulfillment is paved with

consumption of more resources. In our materialistic mindset, we have become convinced that the only way to distinguish ourselves from others, the only way to prove our relative worth, is by acquiring more than those around us. The problem with this orientation to human fulfillment is that we are seldom inclined to feel satisfied with what we've acquired. "This is what the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset called 'the psychology of the spoiled child' who is insatiable because his object is not some particular thing, but a larger share. Increase is itself the object of his desire" (Sax 1980). This desire has been fueled by what Yankelovich terms "the psychology of affluence," a prevailing social attitude that encourages us not only to want but also to expect more of everything. Taken together, these two mutually reinforcing psychologies have triggered an increasing run on the world's increasingly limited resources.

Upon closer examination, the basic flaw in these self-indulgent psychologies rests in their identification of the good life with increased consumption. Consumption, instead of being viewed as a means to an end, has become an end in itself. But to consume for consumption's sake is ludicrous when that which is being consumed is finite and irreplaceable. Clearly, it is time to restore consumption to its proper place as a means to, rather than the end of, human well-being. It is time to outgrow our child-like aspirations. It is time to leave behind the psychology of affluence. But what shall we put in their place?

Voluntary Simplicity

The idea of voluntary simplicity offers promise. Popularized in the book of the same name by Duane Elgin (1981), voluntary simplicity is "a practical expression of the compassionate understanding that our individual well-being is inseparable from the well-being of other members of the human family." According to Elgin, "it means that we are choosing to live our daily lives with some degree of conscious appreciation

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of the condition of the rest of the world."

Underpinning voluntary simplicity is the realization that since consumption is only a means to human well-being, in a world of limits it is wise to obtain the maximum of well-being with the minimum of consumption. The emphasis is on reducing materialistic desires, stretching the utility of exhaustible resources, and recycling. Proponents of voluntary simplicity strive to live below their means. Their goal is to live life in a way that is compatible with the collective needs of the larger community. That is the essence of voluntary simplicity.

Voluntary simplicity is not, however, simply a rationalization of inevitable lifestyle changes brought about by a world of increasingly scarce resources. On the contrary, it is a conscious refutation of the belief that the way to human fulfillment is through materialism. Voluntary simplicity looks to other values to define human growth and development. And it is to those values that we now turn.

The Stuff of Human Fulfillment

In his book The Pursuit of Loneliness, Philip Slater (1976)speaks of an uneasy transition upon returning to the United States from a visit to an impoverished Third World country. "It is difficult," Slater says, "to become reaccustomed to seeing people already weighted down with possessions acting as if every object they did not own were bread withheld from a hungry mouth." Slater's observation is illuminating not only because it reminds us how comparatively well off materially we are in this country, but also because it reminds us how unfulfilling being well off materially really is. Material wealth may indeed enhance our creature comforts and sense of security, but it is not the stuff of human fulfillment.

The really important ingredients in human fulfillment are mental, not material, in nature. They are part and parcel of the increasing realization that we live in a world of limits and that we are all in this world together. They are wrapped up in the recognition that our challenge increasingly is to live life

in a way that is compatible with the dynamic structure of the whole. They are embodied in other-oriented thinking, in ethical extensions outward.

This kind of human growth and development is within reach of all of us. It represents a kind of fulfillment, an intellectual ripening if you will, that is based on the acquisition of more and more information and knowledge about the way the world really is. It is a kind of fulfillment that draws its sustenance not from increasingly scarce resources, but from resources that are increasingly abundant. They are the kinds of resources that can be consumed again and again without destroying their substance--knowledge, wisdom, and meaningful associations with others. This is the stuff of which human fulfillment is really made.

Camping's Challenge

What, then, do we mean when we promote simple living in a materialistic society? Clearly we do not mean simplicity in all facets of living. For it is apparent that the world is becoming increasingly complex. And intellectual growth is desirable to make sense of that complexity. But when it comes to the fundamental maintenance of our lives, we would be wise to follow Thoreau's admonition to "simplify, simplify, simplify." When it comes to matters of food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, it would be wise to unload the clutter, to consume less, to stretch our resources, to make the most of what we have. It would be wise to free ourselves from the possessions that so often possess us and prevent us from focusing on what really matters.

And what really matters? "A broadening of our awareness, an expansion of our sense of self, ultimately a stretching of our identity to include all living things. . . .The best measure of our ascendancy as human beings--the GNP notwithstanding--is the degree to which we extend ethical consideration outward from ourselves to others, to the land, to other creatures and ultimately to the Earth in its entirety" (Dustin 1988).

Organized camping can play an important role in this process. It can foster simple living and promote emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth and development as the highest forms of human fulfillment. By reaching and teaching younger campers and by assisting older campers in examining their current lifestyles, a new version of the American dream can be nurtured.

Promoting Simple Living in Camp Environments

By its very nature organized camping promotes simplicity. This is evident in the remoteness of many camp locations, removed from the glitter and modern conveniences of the city. Camp accommodations tend to be plain, functional, and austere. Beyond this, the camp environment encourages self-reliance, creative leisure, community cohesion, and a reverence for nature. These are all qualities of simple living which are important in terms of human fulfillment. How a camp is run, then, should exemplify a concern for the environment, and for other individuals, and serve as a role model for further actions by campers at home. The ideals of simple living should be expressed in administrative actions and camp policies. Here, for your consideration, are several such possibilities.

Recycling

An obvious tenet of simple living is the reduction of solid wastes and the conservation of natural resources. This may be accomplished by the recycling of aluminum, glass, tin, and paper products. Recycling centers which will accept or purchase these materials are now widespread.

To implement a waste management program food and other items which are selected for purchase should be evaluated for the type and degree of packaging. For example, at the YMCA Camp Eberhart in Three Rivers, Michigan, a decision was made to purchase milk in half-gallon paper cartons, rather than one-gallon plastic containers. The smaller cartons are more easily compacted and are more biodegradable than plastic.

A recycling approach is ecologically sound because we are running out of places to dispose of trash, natural resources and energy supplies are dwindling, and trash disposal costs are climbing. According to a recent article in this magazine, a recycling program may achieve up to a 15-20 percent reduction in solid waste removal costs (Cummins 1988).

In deference to our atmosphere, paper products should be utilized rather than ozone-depleting styrofoam. Although paper tends to be more expensive (it is heavier than styrofoam and is therefore more expensive to ship), it is biodegradable, recyclable, and sometimes reuseable. Styrofoam products are not biodegradable or recyclable and ultimately contribute to the breakdown of ozone in the atmospheric layer which protects us from the sun's ultra-violet rays (Chaplick 1988).

Conserving Energy

Energy conservation is another strategy consistent with the principles of voluntary simplicity. Energy should be conserved by insulating camp buildings. Furthermore, in many camps innovative strategies are being used with renewable energy sources including solar, wind, and water power.

Camp policies may also be initiated to conserve energy. Campers and staff should shut off lights in buildings when they are not in use. Dressing in adjustable layers of clothing should be advocated rather than turning on the heat or air conditioning. Water should be conserved when brushing teeth, showering, and washing dishes. Through exposure to these policies campers will have the opportunity to learn about and practice resource conservation.

Providing Food

There are several ways to promote simplicity in the provision of meals for campers. Fresh, healthy foods should be offered which are not overpackaged or overprocessed. Some of the food used for meals (vegetables, for example) should be grown on the camp premises. Campers should become actively

involved in tending and harvesting crops. Organic food wastes should be utilized as compost in the camp garden.

The administrative actions which promote simple living in the areas of recycling, conserving energy, and providing food should all be brought to the attention of campers, perhaps through a tour of the camp.

Promoting the Natural Environment

Among the most prominent characteristics of organized camps is the outdoor setting. Many of the camp activities which occur outdoors may be conducted to attune campers to the wonders of nature. This intimate contact with the natural environment may nurture in campers a sense of respect for the outdoors and the development of a land ethic.

A recommendation to help individuals appreciate nature at night is evidenced in a passage of "To Know the Dark" by Wendell Berry: "To go in the dark with a light is to know the light. To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight, and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings, and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings." This message indicates the importance of leaving behind even the most simple of technologies, a flashlight, to fully experience the environment. Similarly, other "luxury" equipment can be dispensed with so that campers learn to get along with less (Beringer 1988).

Contact with the outdoors through camping may ultimately become the basis for lifelong interest in non-consumptive recreational pursuits such as hiking, backpacking, landscape photography, bird-watching, and other aspects of nature study. These activities are consistent with the tenets of simple living.

Practicing Minimum Impact Philosophy

Minimum impact or "no trace" philosophy is also consistent with the promotion of simplicity. Such practices should be utilized to minimize human impacts in natural areas. Campers should be educated to avoid choosing overnight sites where it is

necessary to clear away vegetation, level, or trench for a tent. In the past, campers were encouraged to practice these skills, but it has now been established that these practices are detrimental to the environment. A simplistic approach is appropriate to minimize impacts.

Campers should also be aware that small fires conserve dwindling supplies of firewood. As the Indian saying goes, "White man makes big fire and stands far away. Red man makes little fire and stands close." Additionally, anything that cannot be burned should be packed out. Garbage compactors and trash collection services do not exist in the wilderness and campers should be responsible for carrying out their own trash.

Similarly, there are no washing machines and dishwashers in the backcountry. To minimize impacts on the aquatic resources only biodegradable soap should be used. Washing of clothes and dishes should take place well away from lakes and streams so the suds will not pollute the water and affect the aquatic wildlife. Washing should be done using a pot of soapy water and a pot of rinse water both of which should be disposed of in a shallow pit away from the water source.

Human waste products should also be buried in a shallow hole well away from water sources, trails, and campsites. The top layer of soil is alive with bacteria which will decompose the waste. Ultimately, this low technology system works just as well as the high technology of flush toilets.

These simple living, minimum impact strategies will help alleviate environmental problems associated with human use of wildlands. These methods are useful for instilling in campers a sense of respect for nature. This simple living approach is also consistent with organized camping's role in developing dignified and compassionate relationships among campers.

Educating For a Sense of Self

According to Almut Beringer (1988), camp directors are social agents who should build the character of youth.

As Freeman Tilden (1977) states in Interpreting Our Heritage, "Very few children attend camp with the expectation that their education will be broadened." However, this educational advancement inevitably occurs. Much of what is learned may involve the principles of voluntary simplicity. Most camps allow ample time for campers to pause and reflect. This "down time" ultimately allows them to understand better who they are and to develop a sense of calmness and well-being.

Promoting Community Cohesion

Based upon a deeper sense of self-respect, campers may also experience a "meaningful spiritual awakening as [they] develop appreciation and concern for others" (Mitchell and Meier 1983). The social diversity of the camp environment allows the camper to accept those different from oneself. The social nature of the camp environment allows campers to develop close relationships and to learn about the importance of considerate and altruistic behavior. A sense of community allows each individual to "enter into the living stream and lead a full, creative, spontaneous life, at home in the world and at one with [oneself] and [one's] fellow [beings]" (Hausheer 1980).

Conclusion

By implementing the principles of voluntary simplicity outlined above organized camping can nurture values essential to human fulfillment. The simple living learned in camp can contribute to the expansion of a camper's sense of self, foster closer and more meaningful associations with others, and extend ethical considerations outward to the Earth as a whole. Such a dream seems well worth pursuing.

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